



# CAROLINA HURRICANES

NEWS CLIPPINGS • September 21, 2026

## The News & Observer

### How Jackson Blake's rapid rise with the Carolina Hurricanes made him a bargain

Chip Alexander

By any measure, Jackson Blake has made a rapid ascent in the NHL.

The Carolina Hurricanes (Shopping Cart IconShop Canes Fan Gear) took the winger in the fourth round of the 2021 draft. He made the team in 2024 after two years at North Dakota, scored 22 goals in his second season, and has been fitted for a Stanley Cup ring.

He was the Canes' leading scorer in the 2026 playoffs, combining with center Logan Stankoven and veteran left wing Taylor Hall to sizzle as a line and consistently produce.

"Two years ago, if you told me I'd be in this position I probably wouldn't have believed you, obviously," Blake said Friday in an interview at training camp. "It's gone by fast, too. It feels like I've only been here a little bit, but it also feels like I've been here for a while now."

"Yeah, it's pretty crazy and cool to be a part of all this."

Carolina's Jackson Blake (53) reacts after scoring in the second period of the Hurricanes' game against the Golden Knights in Game 6 of the Stanley Cup Final at T-Mobile Arena in Las Vegas, Nev., Sunday, June 14, 2026.

Carolina's Jackson Blake (53) reacts after scoring in the second period of the Hurricanes' game against the Golden Knights in Game 6 of the Stanley Cup Final at T-Mobile Arena in Las Vegas, Nev., Sunday, June 14, 2026. Ethan Hyman [ehyman@newsobserver.com](mailto:ehyman@newsobserver.com)

After his rookie season, Blake was offered and accepted an eight-year, \$45 million contract with the Hurricanes. The signing came shortly before his 22nd birthday, and he jokingly said he planned to splurge and buy a new boat for his family while noting, "I don't really like to spend money very much."

And then Blake went out last season and had 22 goals and 53 points in the regular season. Come the Stanley Cup playoffs, No. 53 had seven goals and a team-leading 20 points in 19 games.

Blake smiled Friday when reminded of his overtime goal that ended the second-round series against the Philadelphia Flyers, an ecstatic Blake skidding across the ice on his knees. Some celly that was.

Jackson Blake of the Carolina Hurricanes celebrates after scoring the game-winning goal against the Philadelphia Flyers in overtime during Game 4 of the teams' second-round Stanley Cup Playoff series at Xfinity Mobile Arena on May 9, 2026 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Jackson Blake of the Carolina Hurricanes celebrates after scoring the game-winning goal against the Philadelphia

Flyers in overtime during Game 4 of the teams' second-round Stanley Cup Playoff series at Xfinity Mobile Arena on May 9, 2026 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Bruce Bennett Getty Images

Blake also had a huge goal in the game that clinched the Cup. After Hall had given the Canes 1-0 lead against Vegas in Game 6 of the Cup Final, Blake made it 2-0 in the second period off a Stankoven pass. Carolina of course won, 3-0.

With NHL teams handing out some mind-bending, megabuck contracts in the offseason — \$18 million a year for the Ducks' Leo Carlsson, to name one — the inevitable question about Blake was, did he sign too soon?

Paying Blake an average of \$5.625 million a season is quite the bargain for the Canes, given his production and his promise.

And to think, Stankoven signed an eight-year, \$48 million deal a few weeks before Blake in July 2025. How good do those two contracts look for the team now?

Carolina Hurricanes defenseman Shayne Gostisbehere (4) celebrates with teammates Logan Stankoven (22) and Jackson Blake (53), after scoring to tie Las Vegas 4-4 in the third period of Game 1 in the Stanley Cup Finals, on Tuesday, June 2, 2026 at Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C.

Carolina Hurricanes defenseman Shayne Gostisbehere (4) celebrates with teammates Logan Stankoven (22) and Jackson Blake (53), after scoring to tie Las Vegas 4-4 in the third period of Game 1 in the Stanley Cup Finals, on Tuesday, June 2, 2026 at Lenovo Center in Raleigh, N.C. Robert Willett [rwillett@newsobserver.com](mailto:rwillett@newsobserver.com)

Blake said Friday he does not regret getting his contract done when he did.

"No, definitely not," he said. "It is what it is. I'm not going to complain. Obviously, you want to make as much as you can and all that stuff. But you also want to have good teams, and if that's going to help us win more, then do it."

"I don't know. There are a lot of big deals coming out, but I don't look at it that way. I'm grateful for what they gave me. I'm sure 'Stanks' feels the same way. We've talked about it. But we want to be here for our whole career, and we want to win every single year, so if that's what it takes that's what it takes."

Blake's quick ascent

After two years of college hockey at North Dakota, where he was a Hobey Baker Award finalist in 2024, Blake won a roster spot in training camp and made the jump to the NHL in the 2024-25 season. It helped that his father, Jason, played in the NHL and was able to advise him on what to expect and what it takes to make it through the grind of a long season.



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At 5-11 and 180 pounds, Blake isn't a big guy on the ice. But his shiftiness, skill and scoring touch make the right-shot winger a dangerous offensive player, and he's become a better 200-foot player.

What's the next step for Blake in his third NHL season?

"I think what we saw in the playoffs, he obviously took that step," Canes coach Rod Brind'Amour said Friday. "If he can maintain that and keep getting better ... I thought the jump from the regular season to the playoffs was pretty evident with him. Hopefully, that keeps going."

Could Blake become a 30-plus goal-scorer this season?

"I don't know," Brind'Amour said. "I would say more than that. ... He's a threat every time he's on the ice. Those are the special players you notice him every time he touches the ice. That's what he's becoming."

Blake's only focus is on winning another Stanley Cup. Once was nice but ...

"You can't even realize until you do it how fun it really is," he said. "Doing it now, and realizing what comes with it, even though it's the hardest trophy to win in sports and it's so long and grueling and makes for a long year and so many games, it's so worth it in the end."

"We know what it's like to win one now. That's the motivation."

Preseason begins: Panthers beat Canes

The Canes and Florida Panthers (Shopping Cart IconShop Panthers Fan Gear) got the preseason started Sunday as the Panthers took a 6-3 win in Sunrise, Florida.

The Panthers played mostly veterans and a lineup that could be on the ice when the two teams start the 2026-27 regular season Sept. 29 at the Lenovo Center. The Canes went with younger guys and prospects while also giving goalie Pyotr Kochetkov his first action since Dec. 20, 2025.

Defenseman Dominik Badinka got the Canes on the board first. Forwards Justin Robidas and Bradly Nadeau scored in a span of 1:11 in the second period for a 3-3 tie, but the Panthers led 5-3 after the second period.

Brady Tkachuk had two goals and an assist for the Panthers, and Cole Reinhardt scored twice. Kochetkov was sharp in the first period, stopping 18 of 19 shots, but allowed five goals on 33 shots.

The Canes and Panthers go at it again Tuesday at the Lenovo Center, a week before the real thing.



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## From Sound Beach to the Stanley Cup: Brandon Bussi's 'surreal' journey with Canes

Chip Alexander

For goaltender Brandon Bussi of the Carolina Hurricanes (Shopping Cart IconShop Canes Fan Gear), it was all a blur.

The clock winding down. Jalen Chatfield behind the net with the puck. The final horn. Teammates streaming on the ice, a mass rush in his direction. Gloves and helmets in the air.

The Stanley Cup had been won. The Stanley Cup.

Bussi said so much flashed through his mind.

"It's a combination of nothing and everything going on, because it's such a surreal moment," he said Thursday after training camp practice. "You imagine it so many times during your life, and the fact that it happened ... in the moment, you almost don't know what to do. Just throw your gloves up and start celebrating.

"It was a beyond-special moment. We worked so hard to make it happen. And now we're even hungrier in a sense that we know what that feeling is like. Being ecstatic, pure joy. You're hungry for it now. You want it again."

The Hurricanes put in their first practice of preseason training camp Thursday and Bussi was back in net again. This time, as the No. 1 goalie. The Bus.

Not that he's claiming the position or taking anything for granted in camp. Goalie Frederik Andersen left in free agency, off to Edmonton, but Pyotr Kochetkov also wants the net and will compete for it.

"We've got two guys and they're both going to play," Canes coach Rod Brind'Amour said Friday. "It isn't like one guy is going to play 70 games. That's not going to happen. Hopefully, both of them push each other and stay healthy, and I think it will be a good rotation."

No complaints from Bussi, who turned 28 in late-June.

"I've played one full year of NHL hockey and I'm here to continue to prove myself," Bussi said. "I see it as getting ready for the season.

"I don't have any goals this year, other than winning the Stanley Cup. I don't have any goals for what I personally want to accomplish this year. I'm a day-to-day person and I'm just focused on opening night, whether I play or not, I'll play when they tell me and try to put my best foot forward."

How Bussi found his way to Carolina ... and the Cup

A year ago, Bussi was in the Florida Panthers (Shopping Cart IconShop Panthers Fan Gear) training camp. After parts of four seasons in the Boston Bruins system, without playing in an NHL game, he signed with the Panthers, then two-time Cup champions. He looked forward to working with goalie Sergei Bobrovsky, a former Vezina Trophy winner with two Cup rings.

The rest of the story has been told and retold, especially during the Canes' Cup run last season.

The Canes were putting goalie Cayden Primeau on waivers Oct. 5 and claimed Bussi off waivers that day, just in case someone took Primeau. Sure enough, Primeau was claimed by the Toronto Maple Leafs.

Bussi had been reassigned to the Charlotte Checkers, the Panthers' AHL team, and was driving to Charlotte.

"My mindset was to go to Charlotte and put my best foot forward and be ready," he said.

His phone rang. His life changed.

Bussi came to Raleigh and got an opportunity to play early with the Canes. He won his NHL debut. He kept on winning.

He watched as Andersen started the first 16 games of the playoffs and did not leave the bench for two months, until the third period of Game 3 in the Stanley Cup Final against the Vegas Golden Knights.

His first test: a penalty shot by the Knights' Mitch Marner, who had scored a natural hat trick in the game and was looking to give Vegas a 5-0 lead in the game.

Bussi made the stop. The Canes rallied, igniting for three goals in 39 seconds and then tying the score late to take the game to overtime. A bad bounce off the end boards hit Bussi's skate and wound up in the net for the winner for Vegas, but ...

"Looking back on that series, I thought we were turning a corner regardless of the goalie change or whatever," he said. "We were finding our game. People say the Marner save was a big moment, but I think we were rounding that corner."

Celebrating the Stanley Cup and a wedding ring

With Bussi in net, the Canes won the last three games, Bussi had a shutout in Game 6 at T-Mobile Arena in Las Vegas as his fiancée, Mary, and family cheered him on.

Bussi lifted the Cup after the handoff from K'Andre Miller, hearing a chorus of "Bus-si! Bus-si!" from the surprisingly large contingent of Canes fans that found their way into the building.

He became a married man in July. His "day" with the Cup in August was spent in and around his hometown of Sound Beach, on Long Island, including a trip to the rink where he first learned to skate and played junior hockey.

During the season, Bussi agreed to a three-year, \$5.7 million contract — or \$1.9 million a year. That turned out to be fortuitous for the Hurricanes come June. But, again, no complaints from Bussi, who was due to become an unrestricted free agent after the season.

Bussi smiled when asked if he had sometimes awakened in the morning and wondered if it was all a dream.

"There were a lot of firsts for me," he said. "It's a privilege to play in the NHL. It takes a lot of hard work.

"I'm going to look back 20 years from now and say 'I can't believe that happened.' Whether it was my day with the Cup or getting married. A lot of things are surreal in that sense. I think I'll always feel like that."



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## SPORTSNET™

### Most interesting contract on every team in Metropolitan Division

Justin Arenburg

Welcome to the contract-maxing era of the NHL.

No, this entire off-season wasn't just a dream. We did, in fact, see record-breaking after record-breaking contract being handed out, and there is no sign of it slowing down. The salary cap is only projected to keep jumping year after year.

However, after seeing all of these deals come through, many are starting to rethink the contract environment.

Maybe it's thinking about how much top players will demand in the coming years, or which contracts look like bargains, or whether the latest deal signed was fair market value. All in all, the shifting landscape has made for some interesting discussions about players' contracts.

In the first two editions of this series, we looked at the Pacific and Central Divisions. Now, it's time to discuss the most interesting contract on every team in the Metro Division.

General manager Eric Tulsky has to be happy that Jackson Blake and Logan Stankoven decided to sign their extensions in the summer of 2025, with one year remaining on their entry-level deals, and not 2026.

We now live in a world where young players are getting handed the bag for showing any significant potential less than 100 games into their NHL career, a bill that Blake and Stankoven certainly fit. But because Leo Carlsson's offer sheet for \$18 million annually didn't come until this year, Tulsky managed to sign the duo to eight-year deals for a total of \$11.117 million annually — Blake at \$5.117 million, and Stankoven for \$6 million.

But imagine what they could've demanded from the Hurricanes this summer if they had waited. When they were still on their entry-level deals last year, both Blake and Stankoven put up career highs in goals and points during the regular season. Then they tore it up in the Stanley Cup Playoffs. Blake led the team in scoring with 20 points in 19 games, while Stankoven was fourth with 16 en route to the Hurricanes winning their second Stanley Cup in franchise history.

Now, with Blake and Stankoven entering the first year of these new contracts, they already look like two of the biggest steals in the NHL.

This has been a long off-season for Columbus Blue Jackets general manager Don Waddell, mainly because of all the trade rumours and contract negotiations surrounding the team's star players.

One was Kirill Marchenko, the Russian winger who is entering the final year of a \$3.85 million AAV deal and poised to become a restricted free agent after the season.

The contract itself has worked out tremendously in the Blue Jackets' favour, with Marchenko putting up 58 goals and 141 points in 155 games over the last two seasons, setting him up for a massive pay bump.

However, that deal might not come in Columbus.

Over the summer, Marchenko's agent Daniel Milstein went public and said that it's unlikely that Marchenko will be re-signing in Columbus, which led to his name being a popular one in trade rumours during the off-season.

But as training camps are set to open, Waddell said Marchenko is in Columbus and told him, "I'm going to play my butt off here."

Considering there is one year left on Marchenko's deal, Waddell's long summer of hearing the noise will likely continue into the season until a contract extension is signed or the forward is traded.

When the former general manager of the New Jersey Devils, Tom Fitzgerald, signed Jake Allen to a five-year deal on July 1, 2025 at \$1.8 million annually, people scratched their heads because of the term handed out to a then 35-year-old goaltender. But given Allen was the backup behind Jacob Markstrom — a good backup at that — lowering the AAV to give more term made sense.

Fast forward a year with the team now under new general manager Sunny Mehta, and this deal has heads turning for a different reason. Markstrom is gone after being dealt this off-season to the Florida Panthers, making Allen the projected No. 1 goalie when the season begins.

While that might make some fans concerned, it doesn't seem like Mehta is.

There might be two reasons behind this.

First, the goaltender position can fluctuate drastically year-to-year, so even if the Devils wanted to get a "top-notch goalie" making over \$8 million AAV, it doesn't guarantee they will be good. Look at the Hurricanes. They won the Stanley Cup using two goalies that combined to make \$3.525 million against the cap.

Second, when Mehta's name popped up as a potential general-manager candidate this summer, the biggest attraction was his knowledge and use of analytics. So, there may be some data not made public which is telling him Allen is the guy for the job. If that's the case, and Allen has a great year, this contract at such a low AAV could help them build a better roster to win the Stanley Cup.

It's funny to think that nobody — probably not even the New York Islanders organization — expected Matthew Schaefer to be as good as he was during his unanimous Calder



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Trophy-winning season as he tied Brian Leetch's NHL record for most goals by a rookie defenceman with 23.

Let's be honest, though: there is really nothing interesting about a player's entry-level deal. The interesting part is picturing what comes after the first contract in the NHL. So, considering how special the first-overall pick looked in just one season, it's safe to assume general manager Mathieu Darche wishes he could've signed Schaefer to an extension this summer instead of having to wait until next year.

Why?

Well, Darche has no choice but to watch another cycle of defencemen get paid under the rising cap, knowing Schaefer's price tag is only going up with every deal that is signed. Just look at the contract the Vancouver Canucks gave Zeev Buium for \$9.38 million annually over eight years with only 76 NHL games played in his career and 26 points.

On top of those 23 goals mentioned earlier, Schaefer finished with 59 points.

At least for one more season, Darche can watch each game and appreciate the talent from his franchise defenceman before preparing to back up the Brinks truck next summer.

This might be the most interesting contract on this list.

Prior to this season, Braden Schneider, the New York Rangers 19th-overall pick from 2020, was on a two-year deal paying him \$2.2 million AAV. During those two seasons, he mainly played on the third pair, putting up six goals and 21 points in year one and two goals and 18 points in year two.

Rangers general manager Chris Drury extended a qualifying offer to Schneider, a restricted free agent, before the deadline in late June, then agreed with the 24-year-old on a raise to \$5.5 million on a one-year deal in July.

Drury also traded for defencemen Marcus Pettersson and Sean Durzi, making the Rangers the highest cap-dedicated team to blue liners this season. As of now, Schneider is still only projected to play third-line minutes again, and that's before considering the minutes 2026 fifth-overall pick Albert Smits might consume.

Maybe we get to a point in the season where the Rangers feel they can't afford to be paying a third-pairing defenceman over \$5 million and look to trade Schneider. If not, at the bare minimum, the Rangers will have to extend a qualifying offer of \$5.5 million to Schneider next off-season.

Talk about picturing what a contract will look like for a player coming out of their entry-level deal. Matvei Michkov put up a tremendous rookie campaign with 26 goals and 63 points in 80 games, but the Philadelphia Flyers' 2023 sixth-overall pick did a 180 last season.

He came into training camp out of shape, according to head coach Rick Tocchet, and had all of his stats go backwards. Michkov finished with 20 goals and 51 points and saw his ice time decrease by almost two minutes per game.

While a lot of players would kill for a 51-point season, the expectation for a player like Michkov is much higher. It seems, however, Michkov realized last year was a wake-up call and has taken his off-season program more seriously this summer.

If Michkov goes out there this year and impresses, his next contract will reflect that. But his season looks like last, he will still get paid, but way less than the Flyers probably hoped for when they drafted him.

47 games and 14 points.

That's all it took to convince Pittsburgh Penguins general manager Kyle Dubas that Ville Koivunen was worth a long-term commitment before he signed him to an eight-year deal at \$4 million per season this summer. Koivunen, 23, has spent over 60 per cent of the last two seasons in the AHL, where he has been producing at a point-per-game rate.

Seeing a deal like this in the NHL is fascinating for multiple reasons, but mainly because we never see such a big bet on a kid that hasn't cracked an NHL lineup full time yet.

Dubas is following the exact strategy that Atlanta Braves general manager Alex Anthopoulos has with his young prospects: offer money up front and hope it will look like a bargain on the back end.

It certainly worked for Anthopoulos when he gave Ronald Acuna Jr. an eight-year, \$100 million deal in 2019. Koivunen probably isn't going to win the Hart Trophy like Acuna Jr. has won the National League MVP, but if he can become a top-six player who produces 40-50 points per season, it would be a win.

On the other hand, if Koivunen flops in the next two years, the Penguins can buy him out in the summer of 2028 and would never have a dead cap hit of more than \$750,000 against them for the following 12 seasons.

Continuing the trend of players getting paid without a ton of NHL games under their belt, we have Ryan Leonard of the Washington Capitals, whose ink might not even be dry yet on his new eight-year contract worth \$10.5 million annually.

Leonard, the eighth-overall pick from 2023, has appeared in just 84 games, but broke out in his first full season with the Capitals last year with 20 goals and 45 points. What makes Leonard's contract interesting is the fact general manager Chris Patrick felt the need to get the eight-year deal done before the old CBA expired.

Everyone can see Leonard has the talent to become a top-tier player in the NHL, but with the Capitals' loaded forward group this season after bringing in the likes of Alex Tuch, Jordan Kyrou and Boone Jenner, Leonard is projected to play on the third line. That might prevent a massive breakout season from happening, and could've saved the Capitals some cap space.



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## Alexander Nikishin Price Tag Revealed Amid Trade Rumors

Nestor Quixtan

Carolina Hurricanes defenseman Alexander Nikishin has been the subject of abundant trade rumors this season. And all of that is because the Carolina Hurricanes don't really want to meet the RFA's asking price.

Meanwhile, potential trade suitors have reportedly taken a step back amid signability concerns.

What hasn't been clear is the precise sticker price on his next contract, until now.

Insider Frank Seravalli revealed the sort of target that Nikishin's camp has in mind. And it's reportedly in the same ballpark as Vancouver Canucks rising star Zeev Buium.

"If I were to guess what Alexander Nikishin is looking for, I think it would be something in the realm of what Zeev Buium [9.3m AAV] signed for in Vancouver."

So, \$9 million seems a little too big for the Hurricanes' britches. And that's something that has contributed to the standoff between Carolina and Alexander Nikishin's camp.

At this point, it seems like it's a game of chicken. Someone will blink first, and, when that happens, the situation may finally come to a resolution.

Hurricanes Don't Want to Break Their Salary Structure for Nikishin

There is a reason the Hurricanes might hesitate at that number beyond simply deciding whether Alexander Nikishin is worth it.

Carolina has been remarkably disciplined with its salary structure.

Sebastian Aho currently carries the organization's highest AAV at \$9.75 million, while Nikolaj Ehlers is at \$8.5 million, Andrei Svechnikov at \$7.75 million and Seth Jarvis at roughly \$7.5 million.

That makes a \$9.3 million contract for Nikishin more than just another big extension.

It would put a defenseman who has played only 81 NHL games right alongside the highest-paid players on the roster.

That's a significant commitment.

Nikishin is certainly talented enough to warrant a major raise. He had 33 points in his first full NHL season and has already established himself as an important young defenseman. But the Hurricanes have built their roster around avoiding the kind of contracts that can become difficult to move later.

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That's especially relevant for a team that just won the Stanley Cup.

Carolina doesn't need to panic.

It can afford to wait and see whether Alexander Nikishin blinks first.

The problem is that the defenseman has a very good reason not to.

The NHL salary market is moving upward, and Buium's eight-year, \$75.04 million extension at a \$9.38 million AAV has given Nikishin's camp a very convenient benchmark.

If Carolina won't pay it, someone eventually might.

Alexander Nikishin Has Little Reason to Give Carolina a Discount

The Hurricanes have benefited from players accepting less money to remain part of a legitimate Stanley Cup contender.

That philosophy has helped Carolina maintain depth while keeping its highest salaries relatively manageable.

But Alexander Nikishin may not be particularly interested in playing that game.

That's because he already has something many players spend their entire careers chasing.

A Stanley Cup.

Nikishin was part of the Hurricanes team that won the championship last season, giving him a pretty strong bargaining position. Carolina can sell the idea that staying in Raleigh gives him a chance to keep competing for championships, but that pitch may not be enough to convince him to leave millions on the table.

And the market is giving him another reason to wait.

Buium is only 20 and had 26 points in 76 NHL games before signing his \$9.38 million AAV extension. Nikishin is older, has already completed his first full NHL season and is coming off a year in which he established himself as a physical presence on Carolina's blue line.

That doesn't automatically make Nikishin worth more than Buium.

It does make the comparison difficult for the Hurricanes to ignore.

If Nikishin's camp believes \$9 million-plus is where the market is headed, there is little incentive to compromise now.

The Hurricanes, meanwhile, have to decide whether their salary structure is more important than keeping one of their most promising defensemen.



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That's what makes this standoff so fascinating.  
Carolina doesn't want to blink.

Alexander Nikishin doesn't appear to have much reason to,  
either.



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### Pyotr Kochetkov Excited, Ready To Get Back Into NHL Action

Ryan Henkel

For the first time in nearly a year, Pyotr Kochetkov is in line to be back playing on NHL ice.

Obviously the stakes aren't as high as it was 274 days ago, given that Sunday's game against the Florida Panthers is the Carolina Hurricanes' preseason opener, but regardless, it's a huge step for the Russian netminder who has missed so much time.

"I'm excited of course because last season was not too good, not too fun for me," Kochetkov said. "Now I just see not too far. Just taking it day-by-day and wait for preseason games. After that, just live step-by-step."

Kochetkov, 27, underwent hip surgery in December of 2025 to address a nagging injury and by the time he was cleared to return, the playoffs were already underway and there was no time to get him back up to speed.

The netminder did dress for parts of the Stanley Cup Final following Frederik Andersen's injury, but he has yet to step foot into the crease for an actual NHL game since his procedure.

Mentally, the inactivity has been tough.

Kochetkov has dealt with injuries before, having dealt already with a myriad of issues in his short NHL career, but a midseason surgery was a new one for him.

"It was tough," Kochetkov said. "I was very happy for the guys, but if you ask about how I felt, of course it was tough. Never in my career have I played only 10 games. First time in my career where I lose so much time. It was so tough mentally, but I have motivation this season to show who I am."

However, the time off has also given him a different perspective on his career and his game.

"After last season, I never think about 'I want this many games.' or stuff like that," Kochetkov said. "I just try and think about practice, recovery and next day. Nothing more because all my career, I looked too far every time. At first, I want to go to the NHL. After that it's I want to be first goalie, I want to play more, blah, blah. When you're older and you see a little bit of a different angle of your life and your game,

now I just want to be excited for what I do and play games. That's what I think about."

That attitude is going to be a helpful one for him to have, especially given the fact that the unorthodox goalie will be entering a relatively new situation in net.

For first time in Kochetkov's career, there's not an established veteran in front of him.

Even though tandem mate Brandon Bussi is older than him by a year, Kochetkov has five years of NHL experience compared to Bussi's one, making him the veteran presence now.

But Kochetkov doesn't see it as anything different. He's just ready to play when his name is called.

"For me, not much changes," Kochetkov said. "Whether it was [Frederik Andersen], [Antti Raanta], now [Brandon Bussi], I have my own individual [thoughts] about what I think about myself. For me, it's just play game and coach think who play next game. For me, nothing changes between this season, last season and the seasons before."

Regardless, this season is a huge opportunity for Kochetkov to reestablish himself as a long-term option for the team though.

The Russian goalie has arguably the highest ceiling amongst all of the organization's netminders, having posted already 11 career shutouts (nearly 10% of his total games played) and carrying the load in multiple seasons already.

However, he's also been very inconsistent at times too, falling victim to multi-game slides and confidence struggles throughout his career.

Finding a way to up the overall consistency factor and be a dependable asset night in and night out will be the biggest key for Kochetkov and it's going to be especially important for himself too as he's entering the final year of his contract.

"For me, it's an interesting season," Kochetkov said. "I have last season on my contract and so I'm excited. We have lots of games soon and hopefully I'll have lots of game time."



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**SB NATION**  
**CANES COUNTRY**

## Preseason Game One Preview: Hurricanes @ Panthers

Bob Wage

The World Champion Carolina Hurricanes start their preseason with a match against their nemesis, Florida Panthers on Sunday night in Florida.

Game time is 7 P.M. and the game will be streamed from the team's home page.

Carolina released their roster for the game and it is comprised mostly of their second unit from training camp. The exceptions are Pyotr Kochetkov, Mike Reilly, and Jesperi Kotkaniemi.

Kochetkov, who hasn't played since last December due to injury, is really looking forward to getting back between the pipes.

Kotkaniemi has seen his status with the team fall and fall as he now seems to be behind Nicolas Deslauriers on Carolina's depth chart. He will be hoping to show the

coaching staff some kind of spark or more inspiration in his game, or whatever else they might be looking for from him.

Charlie Cerrato, Bradly Nadeau, Felix Unger Sorum, Charles Alexis Legault and others will be hoping to impress in this game as well.

Walt Ruff posted the roster on Twitter.

While the Hurricanes will be resting their starters, the Panthers will most likely be playing some vets. I have not seen an official roster sheet yet for them, but I would expect they would see action on home ice.

We will also use this article as the game thread.

Still nothing new on the Alexander Nikishin front.



# CAROLINA HURRICANES

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# SportScan

Articles from outlets covering the Hurricanes' upcoming opponents and league-wide news

1400267 Websites

Sportsnet.ca / Six notable performances in Flames' pre-season opener

Eric Francis

CALGARY — There aren't many better ways to serve notice you feel ready for an NHL roster spot than by scoring twice and ringing a beauty off the post.

Aydar Suniev took a big step towards showing he may soon be capable of helping fill the team's scoring void with a pair of pre-season finishes Sunday night that had the 20-year-old Russian grinning.

"I was working on my shot all summer and I'm glad it's paying off," said Suniev, following a 4-2 loss to open the Flames pre-season schedule at the Dome.

"Felt great. Too bad we lost."

Suniev also happened to score the Flames only goal in last week's prospects game.

"Three goals so far and he's scored all three, so good on him," said coach Ryan Huska.

"He can shoot a puck, and when he has opportunities it's nice to see him have success.

"Every year that Suni has come back there's been a lot of growth in his game. That's what we're excited about. He's maturing both mentally and, for sure, physically as well."

Selected in the third round of the 2023 draft after scoring 45 goals and 90 points in 50 games with the Penticton Vees, the 6-foot-2, 210-pounder with the world-class shot offers plenty of hope for an organization desperately in search of goal scorers.

Suniev cut Seattle's 2-0 lead in half by converting a nifty feed from Sam Honzek in the slot to beat Philipp Grubauer with a quick release along the ice. He stepped across the blue line and rifled a shot in off Nikke Kokko's glove to tie the game 2-2 with 10 minutes left.

Suniev spent two years at UMass-Amherst before spending last season with the Wranglers, where the bulk of his 16 goals came in the second half as the team put an emphasis on helping him learn the defensive side of the game.

A look at a few other notable performances:

Sam Honzek

The best player on the ice all night was a youngster who made a big splash in camp two autumns ago when the 2023 first-rounder led the pre-season in scoring, earning an opening-night gig in the bigs. Injuries ruined that season for him, and last season wasn't much better, as he missed the last five months due to shoulder surgery.

But on this night he was involved at both ends of the ice, forcing turnovers, creating chances and eventually setting up Suniev's first with a brilliant interception and feed.

The two seemed to have good chemistry when on the ice together, giving fans plenty of hope that the roster spot he's been penciled in for due to Jonathan Huberdeau's injury will likely be well-earned.

"He was back like he hadn't missed a year," said Huska of the 6-foot-4, 186-pound lefty, who opened the night with a big hit that should give him confidence his shoulder woes are behind him.

"He brings an element to our team we don't have a lot of — he's got size, but he's also got some real speed. And when he's on the ice he's noticeable not just for his ability to forecheck and put pressure on the opponents, but tonight he made some really good plays with the puck."

Zayne Parekh

Parekh appeared to pick up right where he left off late last season with a confident stride and approach that had him wheeling all around the offensive zone, making great passes and attempting plenty of shots as he moved in from the point.

By night's end he had 10 shot attempts, but only one got through.

Paired with Yan Kuznetsov all night, he also ran the first power-play unit where he had a particularly impressive 4-on-3 in which he, Suniev, Matvei Gridin and Rory Kerins snapped it around in impressive fashion before Suniev rang his shot off the post.

Parekh's engagement level was high, as he took exception to a late shove from Nathan Villeneuve and responded with several shoves, prompting an official to break them up.



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Hunter Brzustewicz

The man they call Brew ran the second PP unit and looked comfortable in a young group.

Some may have been surprised when he started camp in the second group, behind players like Joel Hanley and Brayden Pachal, but the coach said that had more to do with the fact it makes no sense to keep nine defenders in the first bunch.

"The goal is to play in the NHL every single day," said the 21-year-old, who played 34 games with the Flames last year and 34 with the Wranglers.

"Obviously playing a little bit last year was good to see how everyone prepares and goes about things, and then obviously the feedback of what I need to work on in the summer was good."

He worked on his skating, and Huska said he's noticed the difference.

Brennan Othmann

Just a few days after re-signing on a one-year deal with the team as an RFA, the 23-year-old made an early splash with a big hit on defenceman Ville Ottavainen along the boards. The officials didn't like it, and kicked him out of the game with an elbowing major, but not before Seattle's John Hayden got a chance to try offering up a little payback with a fight that ended without consequence.

Too bad he only lasted five minutes, as the winger acquired from the Rangers last season for Jacob Battaglia had the best early scoring chance when he took a great feed from Honzek and was denied by the crossbar.

"For the short time he was in the game, he had an impact," said Huska.

"It's too bad that he got tossed out because he was very noticeable — he drew a penalty, had a chance off the crossbar and had a big hit."

Alex Nylander

As the only player in camp on a professional tryout, the 28-year-old son of former Flame Michael Nylander has just two games to show he's worthy of being offered a contract.

On a team that will be desperately searching to find more goals this year, the thought was that Nylander might be able to help the team's power play, as he'd scored 23 and 34 goals his last two years in the AHL.

You can certainly see the skill and shiftiness, but it's hard to imagine this limited look would entice the team to eat up a roster spot otherwise destined for youngsters in the organization.

The Lines

Nylander – Kerins – Gridin

Honzek – Jones – Hunt

Stromgren – Gross – Basha

Othmann – Castagna – Suniev

Hanley – Pachal

Kuznetsov – Parekh

Wiebe – Brzustewicz

Cooley

Sergeev

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Sportsnet.ca / Sunday Overreactions: Should Maple Leafs just play McKenna with Matthews right away?

Michael Amato

If not for a ping-pong ball bouncing in the perfect spot, it would've been a bitter off-season for the Toronto Maple Leafs.

Instead, it's been a summer full of anticipation thanks to first-overall pick Gavin McKenna falling into their laps. McKenna has been a lifeline of sorts for an organization that was staring down a crossroads at the conclusion of the 2025-26 campaign. Should they rebuild? Does Auston Matthews want out? The chatter around those topics that were once increasing in volume is barely audible at this point.

Now, the focus is on how great McKenna can be and, maybe more importantly, what he can do for Matthews. The American gold medallist is coming off a pair of injury-filled down seasons, and the hope is that the addition of a talented playmaker like McKenna can re-energize Matthews and help him return to his perch atop the league's best goal scorers.

McKenna and Matthews should play together immediately

The much-anticipated answer to the question of who McKenna will play with to start this season was answered Thursday, as the rookie began training camp skating on a line with John Tavares and William Nylander. That should be a great spot for McKenna since he gets to play with two high-end offensive players, but many were still disappointed that he isn't playing with Matthews right out of the gate. You would think the two should have great chemistry, as McKenna is a natural playmaker who could help Matthews find the net more frequently once again after the team lost Mitch Marner.

There is a lot riding on this season for the Maple Leafs, so putting McKenna and Matthews together immediately makes the most sense because they need as many reps as they can get together in a shorter pre-season to start gelling.

Overreaction? Yes

There's no reason to rush McKenna up to the top unit right away. Matthews and McKenna can still build chemistry on the power play, and that will give McKenna some time to get his feet under him in the NHL before taking on the responsibilities of playing on a No. 1 line. The opposition figures to deploy its top checking line and best defensive pair against the Matthews unit frequently, which would make things more challenging for McKenna to deal he gets acclimated to the NHL. Playing with Tavares and Nylander gives him the best of both worlds, in the sense that he gets to play with great offensive players and the Leafs can still shelter him a bit. McKenna looked dangerous in Toronto's first pre-season game Saturday night with Tavares and Nylander, displaying confidence with the puck and generating a few chances with his creativity.

Meanwhile, Jack Roslovic, who is starting with Matthews, has a history of coming out strong in the early part of the season before cooling off. For instance, 15 of Roslovic's 21 goals last season came before the end of January. The year before that, 17 of Roslovic's 22 goals came prior to the new year. Roslovic essentially becomes like a starting pitcher after he's gone through the batting order twice. Teams start to figure out how to defend him. The Leafs may as well try to take advantage of it while they can. So, when Roslovic slows down, and McKenna has two or three months of NHL experience under his belt, it may be a better time to unite him with Matthews.

There's also a risk of giving McKenna too much too soon, both literally and figuratively. If you start McKenna on the top line and he goes through the inevitable growing pains that any 18-year-old rookie will, moving him off Matthews' line is going to feel like a demotion. Give him a chance to thrive slightly further down the lineup and promote him when the time is right.

The Winnipeg Jets could use some positivity right about now. Last season was a disaster, and now their franchise goalie and former Hart

Trophy winner wants out. The Connor Hellebuyck drama is grabbing all the headlines at training camp, and it's distracting from the impending season on the ice, which is a fairly critical one. Winnipeg is just two years removed from a Presidents' Trophy, and last season's disappointment left a bad taste in everyone's mouth. But there was a silver lining to that futility: the Jets ended up with Viggo Bjork at eighth overall, and the early returns feel very promising. Bjork starred at the prospect's tournament last week, scoring a highlight-reel goal while standing out all over the ice.

The Jets would be wise to keep Bjork around to start the season and pencil him as a key member of their top six.

Overreaction? No

It makes a lot of sense for the Jets to give Bjork a look for a few reasons. The first is he fills an immediate need for Winnipeg up front, as the Jets are very thin at centre. After Mark Scheifele, Adam Lowry would fill the two-hole if Bjork isn't an option. Lowry is a fine player, but he doesn't feel like a second-line centre on a team that has playoff aspirations. There has also been a recent example of a pick outside the top five who came in and thrived at the centre position in Pittsburgh Penguins second-year pro Ben Kindel. After being taken 11th overall, the Pens gave Kindel a shot last year, and he never let them take him out of the lineup. Kindel ended up finishing with 17 goals as Pittsburgh surprised many by making the playoffs.

The Jets roster has also become a bit stale, so adding a young, energetic player like Bjork could be contagious throughout the entire roster. Kindel played a similar role in Pittsburgh as that veteran roster suddenly looked revitalized a year ago. Bjork could provide an injection of skill to the Winnipeg lineup that would make them more dynamic and tougher to play against. For a team that is looking for some positivity and good vibes heading into 2026-27, the pros outweigh the cons when it comes to giving Bjork a long look.

Dylan Larkin has played his last game for the Red Wings

The relationship between Larkin and the Detroit Red Wings is hanging by a thread. Larkin requested a trade out of Detroit in June and with nothing materializing on that front, the Red Wings stripped him of the captaincy heading into training camp. The veteran centre also hasn't taken the ice yet with his teammates due to an upper-body injury suffered while training. Larkin has reportedly only given the Wings a few teams to which he's willing to be dealt, so player and organization appear to be at a stalemate until things get sorted. It's hard to see a scenario where Larkin ever puts on a Red Wings sweater ever again.

Overreaction? Yes

While it seems unlikely, it's at least possible. If there's any chance, it depends on the new general manager and if there's any way they can mend the relationship with Larkin. It's no secret that Larkin and Steve Yzerman weren't on the best of terms, so maybe a new voice can settle things down and get Larkin to a place where he's willing to play while he waits for a deal to be made.

If Larkin doesn't want to expand his list of teams, it may take quite a while for a deal to take shape, and that means he'd have to sit at home waiting. That's not going to help his trade value, and an interested team may be more willing to make a play for Larkin if they see him excelling on the ice. I'm not saying the Wings can smooth things over entirely with their former captain, but I do think there's a world where he plays games in Detroit until a deal gets consummated.

Expansion will water down NHL

It feels like it's a matter of when, not if, that the NHL will expand in the next few years. While nothing is official, talks are ramping up around a team in Houston or Austin, and other places like Atlanta and Phoenix have interest in trying their hand with an NHL franchise again as well. It does make sense that the league would be interested in expanding, as these are major markets and adding teams would generate more revenue for the league. Plus, with seven Canadian teams, the NHL only has 25 American franchises, which is significantly less than the NBA, NFL and MLB. There's room to grow, but is there enough talent to fill out all these teams and still deliver a quality product on the ice?

Last year we saw two teams make the playoffs in the Western Conference with negative goal differentials, and the Los Angeles Kings



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claimed the final spot with just 90 points and 22 regulation wins. Adding more teams into the mix runs the risk of watering things down further.

Overreaction? No

This is a legitimate concern. There are a lot of good players outside the NHL right now, but enough to fill potentially another four teams where it feels like expansion is eventually heading? That's debatable. You could certainly build out rosters with some quality players, although every team having a couple of elite, talented players who are marketable and can help sell tickets feels challenging. Let's also keep in mind what will happen when a bunch of injuries hit teams across the league in a condensed season when there's an Olympics or World Cup of Hockey. Teams will have to start calling up players that are further and further away from having NHL talent.

Ultimately, expansion may be a big benefit for the financial health of the league, but it's unlikely that it will make the product on the ice better.

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Sportsnet.ca / Canucks' Jonathan Lekkerimaki entering massive development year

Iain MacIntyre

PENTICTON – When he was drafted 15th overall by the Vancouver Canucks four years ago, Jonathan Lekkerimaki immediately became the biggest fish in a prospect pool so shallow that you could have waded through it without getting your shoelaces wet.

Some would argue he was the only fish.

The Canucks, under previous general manager Jim Benning, had just gone through a pair of drafts in which they selected only twice in the top 112 and not higher than 41st.

Lekkerimaki instantly became the National Hockey League organization's No. 1 prospect, a scoring winger whose development was going to be crucial for the future.

A year later, the Canucks drafted Tom Willander, who has already become an NHL regular on defence alongside Elias Pettersson (Junior), selected 65 spots behind Lekkerimaki in 2022.

In the last two drafts, the Canucks added Braeden Cootes, Caleb Malhotra, Adam Novotny and Brooks Rogowski, and last season's trade with the Minnesota Wild also brought to Vancouver Zeev Buium and Liam Ohgren, Lekkerimaki's friend and former junior teammate in Sweden.

"Prospects" is a bit of a catch-all term, but all of these young players project ahead of Lekkerimaki, who has demonstrated scoring chops at the American League level (33 goals in 63 games) but little in various call-ups with the Canucks (five goals and nine points in 37 NHL games).

Mostly, Lekkerimaki has struggled to stay healthy, and last season he was shut down in February for shoulder surgery due to an injury initially sustained during an October game against the Washington Capitals.

At 22 years old, the right-shot winger obviously still has time to build an NHL career. But the clock is ticking, and with his waivers-free period ending at the start of next season, this is a massive development year for Lekkerimaki.

"You can learn from that," the soft-spoken Swede said of his fight for fitness. "It's a tough league to play in and you've got to prepare as much as you can. I think I've learned a lot and it's fun to be back.

"But it is a learning process. My first two years (in North America), I was up and down. I tried to learn every day. But now I feel like it's my third year, I'm more used to everything. I know Manny, know the system, so I'm more prepared now."

Before coaching the Canucks, Manny Malhotra was Lekkerimaki's coach in Abbotsford the last two seasons. And Ryan Johnson, Lekkerimaki's minor-league GM and development supervisor, is now running the NHL team.

Lekkerimaki should benefit from this familiarity, and both Malhotra and Johnson have been preaching patience with regard to all of their prospects. But Lekkerimaki has to help himself on the ice, too.

Neither especially fast nor elusive, Lekkerimaki must find his way to scoring areas at the NHL level while being stronger in puck battles and along the boards.

In the pre-season opener Saturday night in Seattle, Lekkerimaki had a pair of second assists on goals by linemates Cootes and Arshdeep Bains, but also lost the puck behind Vancouver's net on the final goal of a 4-2 loss to the Kraken by an inexperienced Canucks team.

Canucks training camp ended Sunday in Penticton. After a day off for players on Monday, when management is expected to start trimming the roster, the Canucks play their second of four preseason games Tuesday in Calgary against the Flames.

Lekkerimaki's full recovery from shoulder surgery is positive news, and he looked comfortable at camp mostly on a line with his pal, Ohgren, and centre Marco Rossi.

"I think he looks great," Ohgren, who was not part of the lineup in Seattle, said after the Canucks' scrimmage on Saturday. "I mean, I know he had a pretty tough season last year with injuries and stuff, but I think he's been working hard this summer to get back to 100 per cent and he feels like he's ready now. And yeah, he looks good.

"I mean, it's always tough when you get injured, especially long term. You can't show what you actually can do. He's an unbelievable skill player; he has a great shot. I just think if he gets the chance and he can stay healthy, he's going to have a long and great career. And I think he's more than good enough to play at this level."

Having established himself as an NHLer last season, Ohgren is in a position to help Lekkerimaki transition.

"I just tried to, you know, do anything I could to stick in the lineup (and) do what I do best: work hard, skate a lot, use my speed, take pucks to the net, do the simple stuff," Ohgren said. "I think that's what kept me in the lineup. And yeah, because I know when I play my best hockey, I just don't think at all (about other things). I just try to work hard and do the stuff I'm good at, and then the rest will come. Goals will come, points will come. Just try to focus on doing the right thing and work hard every day."

Chosen by the Wild four picks after the Canucks claimed Lekkerimaki, Ohgren has physical advantages over his former Djurgardens linemate. Ohgren possesses speed and power in his game that allow him to create impact even if he is not scoring. For now, it looks like Lekkerimaki will have to produce points to stick in the NHL.

"We'll continue to talk about the qualities of an NHL player and the ability to win pucks and be heavy in puck battles," Malhotra said when asked halfway through camp about Lekkerimaki. "That's a learned behaviour. Again with him, I've seen the growth over the course from last year to this year.

"He's playing with a lot of confidence. And again, his ability to come up with pucks and make the right play and not force plays that aren't there has stood out, especially the offensive reps. Defensively, again, he's done a good job of winning puck battles, being in the right places, and making sound defensive reads. So those things all lend themselves to being an everyday NHL (player)."

ICE CHIPS – Johnson said in his camp-ending press conference on Sunday that injured goalie Thatcher Demko, who was on the ice in Penticton but unable to practise with the main group, continues to make progress in his recovery from major hip surgeries. But the GM still has no timeline for Demko's NHL return. . . . While starting the process of reducing their preseason roster, the Canucks also have first crack at anyone placed on waivers by the other 31 teams. "It gives us an opportunity," Johnson said. "I've got to look at every scenario to improve the team in areas that I think we need. As we move along, there's going to be some pretty good hockey players that are going to be on waivers." . . . Malhotra's voice was raspy after four days of shouting instructions to players. "I won't have to yell as much over the next few days, so hopefully I get it back," he joked. . . . The coach said he was "really happy" with camp and especially the adaptability of players and their quick understanding of new system concepts.

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Sportsnet.ca / Maple Leafs notebook: McKenna 'will remember this day forever'

Luke Fox

TORONTO — The future Hall of Fame goaltender, the flashy leading point-getter, the loyal leading goal scorer, and the locally raised prized free agent defenceman were all introduced by name at Scotiabank Arena as the Toronto Maple Leafs took the ice for the first time in five months.

None of them received an ovation as loud as the one shown upon Gavin McKenna, No. 92 in your program and No. 1 on the draft board.

"To know I got this fan base behind me, it feels good," the teenage phenom said, following his first game in his new barn. "When you hear that, you get almost chills. So, it was pretty cool."

Cool that McKenna's extraordinary vision and silky hands were on full display Saturday. In his first taste of pro hockey, McKenna flexed elite poise and made several buttery passes to billet dad John Tavares to generate scoring chances. He ripped three shots of his own and logged more than 19 minutes of ice, including looks on Toronto's second power-play unit and at 6-on-5.

The rookie also committed a hooking penalty in the O-zone and coughed up a couple of pucks in the neutral zone. He stood out. He fit in. And, like the rest of an A group that dropped a 4-1 decision to the Montreal Canadiens split squad, he left room for improvement.

"I felt pretty good. I thought I created a bit but also had a couple turnovers, which I think kind of just happens with nerves," McKenna said. "But I think it was a good start and a lot to build on."

Jim Hiller has already identified his youngest weapon as a smart self-evaluator and has no interest in being too critical too soon, lest McKenna start overthinking his game. The coach doesn't want to pile any more pressure on a prospect that already arrives with sky-high hopes.

"In a game where I didn't think there was a lot of offence from either team, he was in on three or four chances, so you'll take that every day," Hiller said.

"If I say one thing to him, it's just to be a little bit closer to the puck. We want him to have the puck. Sometimes in the NHL, you got to get right there and surround it, and then make plays out of that, rather than waiting to see if somebody can get it to you. So, he'll figure that part of the game out."

"It's not easy. You jump into your first game after a very short two practices, and then right into a preseason game in the NHL. But he's got a great head on his shoulders. He's going to continue to get better as camp goes on, as he gets more comfortable and adjusts to this pace of play," Matthews assessed. "But obviously he had moments out there where you can tell just how skilled and how talented he is."

McKenna and Tavares carpool to camp every day from the leader's west-end home, and the 18-year-old has only taken the wheel once so far. Tavares drove Saturday.

"We lost today, so we might have to change it up," McKenna smiled.

"I'm very lucky to be able to step on that ice for my first time with guys like Matthews, Knies, J.T., Willy, all those guys. So, just super lucky, and I'll remember this day forever."

Tanev 'healthy as anybody'

Chris Tanev may have endured worse injury luck in 2025-26 than anyone in the league.

The 36-year-old defenceman suffered a concussion, dealt with a spinal issue, then tried to rehabilitate a lingering core muscle injury before eventually succumbing to season-ending surgery.

Tanev was limited to a measly 11 games played, and his absence was a major reason Toronto surrendered a conference-worst 3.6 goals per game.

How encouraging, then, is it that the veteran was a full participant in his first Maple Leafs game Saturday, reuniting with shutdown partner Jake McCabe after 265 days away?

"Tanny looks awesome out there. Skating real well," McCabe enthuses. "His presence is certainly felt within our group."

Hockey fans already know the name, but this is not the blog. From Sportsnet, 32 Thoughts: The Podcast with NHL Insider Elliott Friedman and Kyle Bukauskas is a weekly deep dive into the biggest news and interviews from the hockey world.

Latest episode

Considering the wear and tear Tanev has endured and his importance to the NHL's oldest D corps, concern over his availability will linger. But management assures Tanev is all systems go.

"He's had an amazing recovery," GM John Chayka said. "He pushes himself as hard as anybody in the gym and on the ice. So, I feel really confident that his injuries are in a good place. He's as healthy as anybody."

To start, coach Jim Hiller will reunite his best two pure defenders as opposed to balancing his top four with, say, McCabe-Raddysch and Rielly-Tanev pairings.

"The other team's top line hops out, we're anxious to pop out there too and try to shut 'em down. D-zone draws, penalty killing, all these responsibilities that we have. And Chris brings leadership in the room," McCabe said.

"I mean, he's honestly probably the toughest guy I've played with — with what he's played through and what he can play through. Yeah, we're for sure excited to see him back up."

No one is more excited than Tanev himself, who keeps on tickin' after every lickin'.

"I still love hockey. I love being around the guys," Tanev said. "I want to win more than ever. It is pretty simple for me."

Rifai vs. Xhekaj

Good on Marshall Rifai (6-foot-2, 205 pounds) for dropping the gloves with Florian Xhekaj (6-foot-3, 195 pounds) after the Canadiens winger delivered a few cross-checks to Matthews and hit William Nylander.

Xhekaj landed more punches in the heavyweight tilt, but the Marlies defenceman held his ground and showed some pushback.

"That's appreciated," Matthews said. "Guys sticking up for each other — that's what it's all about."

"Marshall's been around here for a bit now, and he's one of the hardest-working guys I've ever met across. A guy, anytime he's been called up, never complains. Always doing extra, always finding ways to try to get better, and it's something you really appreciate when you see guys like that in the organization. That was very appreciated, him dropping the gloves like that."

Why Matthews-McKenna will wait

One day Leafs Nation will witness the inevitable: Gifted setup man McKenna regularly putting pucks on a platter for Matthews.

But there is some logic to starting Matthews alongside old U.S. National Development Team pal Jack Roslovic, who signed a two-year, \$8 million contract in free agency.

"I'm really excited to play with him again. We've definitely stayed in touch and stayed pretty close over the years. But hanging out and seeing him again, he's a lot of fun to be around. He's funny. He's always got something to say. Definitely a chatty guy, which is great in the locker room," Matthews said. "I'm excited to rekindle that chemistry with him."

"Stoked," Roslovic echoed. "It is going to be awesome. I am really familiar with his game. I am really familiar with the person and who he is as a guy and a leader. I've seen him grow in a lot of ways, and I've been able to be on his journey a little bit from the outside. Every time we get a



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chance to talk, picking up the phone has been super easy. It just feels like we left off where we started."

The 29-year-olds' reunion arrives after a false start.

Former GM Brad Treliving explored a Roslovic signing in the 2025 off-season as well, before the versatile forward settled for a one-year contract with Edmonton on Oct. 8.

Roslovic says he was "definitely" disappointed that the mutual interest didn't result in a contract a year ago, but his productive flashes alongside Connor McDavid and Leon Draisaitl encouraged Chayka to reopen abandoned negotiations.

"It is definitely the right time to sign here. I am excited that it happened this way and look forward to what is in store here," Roslovic said.

"Connor and Leon are highly, highly skilled guys. There is obviously a God-gifted talent that they have there. But it's like the story with Auston — it is the drive, the dedication, and the little things that make them special, more than any skill that was given to them. It is all work ethic. It is all your ability to come in and want to win every day, put your best foot forward in what is needed. I was really impressed by them. I can't wait to see what this group has as well."

Hiller began talking line combos with his forwards weeks prior to camp's opening. Matthews sees Roslovic — a 20-goal man thrice over — as a fleet winger who can complement him by carrying the puck through the neutral zone and finish plays.

"Austin and Rosie have played together, so that's kind of an easy one," Hiller said.

"You spend all summer doing this, and then the second period of the second game looks different. So, this is the plan for now. But nothing set in stone."

Tavares's other tenant

Brendan Brisson was eight years old when John Tavares — one of Brendan's super-agent father Pat's clients — came and lived at his house in California for a stretch.

Now winger Brendan, who inked a one-year deal in Toronto and is skating with the Marlies, is hunkering down with McKenna at Casa Tavares for training camp.

A wild full-circle moment, as the 24-year-old Brendan finds himself hanging out with Tavares's young boys between skates.

When Brendan was a kid, Tavares introduced him to wonders of the protein shake. Now he's invited Pat's boy into High Park's 24-hour hockey-prep experience.

"It's pretty dialed," Brisson said. "He's very structured. It's cool for me and Gavin to see that."

That Tavares, 35, was the only Leaf to appear in all 82 games last season is no accident.

"He's got everything you need," Brisson, 24, marveled. "He's got the saunas, the cold tubs, the Normatec (compression therapy), the red light (therapy), everything to help your game. And it's awesome to watch his everyday routine. Me and Gavin are maybe making a few jokes about it, but we're also following along a bit too."

Sportsnet.ca LOADED: 09.21.2026



# CAROLINA HURRICANES

## NEWS CLIPPINGS • September 21, 2026

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TSN.CA / 'A lot to build on': McKenna creates buzz in Leafs pre-season debut

Mark Masters

Gavin McKenna felt the love from Leafs Nation during his NHL pre-season debut on Saturday night. The first overall pick in June's draft heard a huge cheer when introduced as part of the starting lineup.

"It was super cool," the 18-year-old from Whitehorse said. "Yeah, to know I got this fan base behind me, it feels good. I think when you hear that, you get almost chills."

There was a buzz in the building every time McKenna jumped over the boards.

"You could tell when he had the puck, because the crowd would get so excited," Canadiens goalie Samuel Montembeault told TSN. "He's a special player and it was fun to play against him."

McKenna didn't register a point, but landed three shots on net while playing on Toronto's second line with John Tavares and William Nylander.

"Being out there with the guys, you know, the talent in this room, very lucky to be able to step on that ice for my first time with guys like [Auston] Matthews, [Matthew] Knies, JT, Willie, all those guys. So I'm just super lucky and I'll remember this day forever."

Head coach Jim Hiller gave the rookie left winger plenty of ice time, including a late look with the 6-on-5 unit. McKenna ended up logging 20 minutes and 39 seconds, which was fourth among Toronto's forwards.

McKenna was whistled for an offensive-zone hooking penalty, but also drew a holding call on Canadiens defenceman Maksymilian Szuber.

"In a game where I didn't think there was a lot of offence from either team, he was in on three or four chances, so you'll take that every day," Hiller said. "So, yeah, I thought he was good. Good start for him."

"I felt pretty good," McKenna said. "I thought I created a bit, but also had a couple turnovers, which I think kind of just happens with nerves."

McKenna is already looking forward to Wednesday's pre-season game against the Ottawa Senators, which will be the final tune up before things start for real on Sept. 29.

What can the kid take from Saturday's debut?

"I would just tell him not to overthink it," said Hiller. "Clearly, he's a pretty good self-evaluator, you know, and he'll put that pressure on himself, so I'm not going to go and do that to him this early. And we'll just see how he adjusts himself to the next game."

But then Hiller identified one way McKenna can improve.

"If I say one thing to him, just to be a little bit closer to the puck," the coach continued. "A little bit closer. We want him to have the puck and sometimes in the NHL you've got to just get right there and surround it and then make plays out of that rather than, you know, waiting and seeing if somebody can get it to you."

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Matthews looked good in his first game action since suffering a grade 3 MCL tear and quad contusion on March 12.

"He was flying out there," observed new Leafs defenceman Darren Raddysh. "He's been flying ever since he got back from the summer. So, yeah, just fun to be on his team once in a while."

Matthews produced a primary assist and had a game-high six shots on net.

"It felt good," the 29-year-old centre said. "Maybe first half of the first period, definitely felt pretty rusty, but as the game went on, it felt better and better. And then, you know, as we continue to skate and practice

and play one more game, I think just the conditioning of the legs kind of get going a little bit more and [you] transition into game shape a little bit. But, all in all, I mean, it was a good first game. I thought I had some good moments, good opportunities, and take that and go from there and keep building."

One moment, in particular, stood out as Matthews reached a speed burst of 35 km/h during a rush up the ice. He only hit that number twice last season when he finished with career lows in goals (27) and points (53).

"I thought he was really skating," said Hiller. "I thought he had the puck, and he looked dangerous. He had a lot of looks. So I liked his game. If I think of one moment in the game was when he rounded the net, came through, kind of sliced through a couple guys, end-to-end. You know, I hadn't seen that a lot out of him last year, and so that was a really positive thing to see. He was moving, carrying the puck. He was dangerous and the goalie made a couple really good saves on him."

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Leafs defenceman Marshall Rifai dropped the gloves with Canadiens winger Florian Xhekaj in the second period.

"They were upset that I was going after some of their guys," Xhekaj said. "They were chatting to me so I was like, 'Let's go then' and he ended up dropping them so it was fun."

Xhekaj had taken runs at Matthews and Nylander earlier in the period.

"That's appreciated, obviously," Matthews said of Rifai. "You know, guys sticking up for each other, that's what it's all about."

Since joining the Leafs organization in the 2022-23 season, Rifai has played mostly in the American Hockey League with the Marlies.

"Marshall's been around here for a bit now, and he's one of the hardest working guys I've ever come across," Matthews said. "A guy that anytime he's been called up, never complains, you know, always doing extra, always finding ways to try to get better. It's something you really appreciate when you see guys like that in the organization. And appreciated him dropping the gloves like that. He's played some games with us in the last couple years, and each night he just competes and competes, and he's got everybody's back out there, so it's great."

It was certainly a spirited tilt on Saturday night so much so that Xhekaj's brother, Arber, watched the highlights during his own stay in the penalty box during the split-squad game taking place in Montreal.

"It was my first one in five, six months so I had some anger to let out," Florian said with a grin.

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Toronto's only goal during the game at Scotiabank Arena came courtesy Raddysh during a second period power play. Raddysh's 97.6 mph point blast broke the stick of Josh Anderson before being accidentally deflected in by Mike Matheson.

"He's obviously got a bomb and a big shot threat up there, and he's deceptive," Matthews said of Raddysh, who led all NHL defencemen with 10 power-play goals last season. "I mean, he made some great plays to me and I've got to put that in. Yeah, you can just tell he's got so much poise up there and really can maneuver and quarterback a power play extremely well and has that big shot to kind of cap everything off."

The Leafs, who practised the power play for the first time on Saturday morning, converted on just one of six chances against the Canadiens during the game in Toronto.

"We had a lot of chances," Raddysh noted. "I think that was the first time we've actually been out there against a PK that's been going hard. So, yeah, I liked it. We'll watch the video, go through what we need to work on, and take it for the next game."

The Leafs generated five shots on the power play. The top unit featured two newcomers with Raddysh and Jack Roslovic joining Matthews, Nylander and Tavares.

"When they got in the zone, they moved the puck around," Hiller said. "They had more chances, of course, to score than the one that went in. So there was some positive stuff there."



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Raddysh was playing his first game with the Leafs since joining his hometown team via a sign and trade with the Tampa Bay Lightning.

"It was pretty cool," the 30-year-old said. "Yeah, I've been thinking about this since the day it happened. It was only pre-season, but it was pretty cool to step on that ice in the Leafs jersey."

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Sergei Bobrovsky stopped 10 of 11 shots in his first action with the Leafs.

"It was a good game," said the 38-year-old goalie. "The building was great, great energy, great to play some hockey. I thought the guys did a great job to keep the shots on the outside. Yeah, we'll keep building. It's the first game. We're getting together, building the chemistry, building the good emotions here. So I'm just going to keep working."

Bobrovsky debuted a new mask during the game courtesy designer Dave Gunnarsson.

"I got the Leafs logo," he noted. "I got the Arhangel Mihail... Just keep it simple. I'm orthodox, and I believe in God."

Bobrovsky logged 28 minutes and 36 seconds before being relieved by Anthony Stolarz midway through the second period.

Bobrovsky bested the Leafs in two playoff series during his time with the Florida Panthers. What's it like to see him in Toronto's net now?

"It's an absolute treat," Matthews raved. "I'm not going to lie, I was so excited when we signed him. And just to be around him, I mean, the stories, the hype around him and just the professional that he is and how he looks after himself, just his focus, it's extremely impressive. I couldn't be happier to have him on our side."

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After skating on the fourth line during the first two practice days at training camp, winger Dakota Joshua did not suit up in Saturday's games.

"He's dealing with something," Hiller confirmed.

Joshua's injury may open the door for Steven Lorentz, who skated as the 13th forward in the first two practices.

Lorentz, like so many Leafs, is looking to bounce back after a down year.

"You just got to get back to basics," he said. "I don't know if losing a piece of my identity [is the right way to put it], but there was just some times where I struggled with confidence," the 30-year-old from Kitchener, Ont. said before Saturday's game.

"I was just almost trying too hard a little bit at times, and that can kind of throw you off your game. I think you just honestly have to go back and simplify, and I play a simple game to begin with. So rather than going out and thinking, you know, you've got to make a big splash here and try and run every guy in sight, you know, you've just got to play the right way, check when you have to check, use your stick, use your speed, and play smart along the boards. It's just simple things, but that's when I get back to my game. That's when I start feeling more confident."

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Leafs lines on Saturday night in Toronto:

Knies - Matthews - Roslovic

McKenna - Tavares - Nylander

Lorentz - Quillan - MacEwan

Groulx - Koblar - Nansi

Andrae - Raddysh

McCabe - Tanev

Rifai - Danford

Bobrovsky starts

Stolarz

Leafs line on Saturday night in Montreal:

Cowan - Paul - Sissons

Duhaime - Blueger - Lettieri

Brisson - Shaw - Tverberg

Pezzetta - Rybinski - Johnstone

Ekman-Larsson - Blankenburg

Mermis - Stecher

Chadwick - McWard

Akhtyamov

Hlavaj

TSN.CA LOADED: 09.21.2026